

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

INTRICATE RITUALS: WHY MEN JOIN THE MILITARY

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“You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men.”
-Barbara Kruger, *Untitled*

ABSTRACT

Why do men enlist despite the many dangers and high costs associated with being a soldier? Militaries, especially those belonging to local and global hegemony, rely on enlistment—thus, investigating this question represents an essential part of understanding interstate violence and the phenomena of war itself. In this thesis, I apply a queer mode of analysis to examine the motivations of men who decide to join non-conscription militaries. Ultimately, I argue that the desire for homosocial connection—which is stymied in civilian life—drives men to enlist due to the possibility of connection with other men in military life. I analyze nearly 40,000 posts from soldiers across the world, paying close attention to themes of homosocial intimacy. Additionally, I conduct close readings of military recruitment advertisements from the last two centuries, finding that militaries explicitly leverage the promise of homosocial connection in order to recruit new soldiers.

INTRODUCTION

For at least 400 years, crossing the equator has promised sailors—including US navy personnel—a days-long celebration known as “crossing the line” in which two groups emerge: the shellbacks and the pollywogs. The shellbacks—line-crossing veterans—usher in the “equatorial virgins” (the pollywogs) with complex ceremonies that have been passed down through generations of sailors.

While traditions vary across time, region, and ship, most crews abide by the following schedule. Leading up to the crossing, the shellbacks harass the pollywogs, dumping trash on them, pushing them into the ocean, making them act like dogs by forcing them to strip and wear leashes, and generally belittling them.¹ The Court of Neptune—held the day of crossing—constitutes the apex of the ritual. Each pollywog receives an official summons to the court, where they stand trial and prove their worth. An esteemed shellback takes on the role of Neptune, dressing in a makeshift tunic and speaking in a booming voice.

During the trial, pollywogs participate in a beauty show, dressing up as women. They must win over Neptune with their feminine wiles, grace, and sense of fashion. Additionally, each pollywog must be examined by the royal doctor who, in a spectacular demonstration of his medical knowledge, inspects the bodies of the sailors with ridiculous medical instruments. Often, the royal surgeon will make an appearance to perform surgery on unfit sailors, simulating the removal of organs, including the genitals. At all line crossings, the kissing of the baby’s stomach is obligatory. The most voluptuous shellback sits shirtless on a throne, his stomach covered in raw eggs, crisco, or grease, depending on the ship’s specific tradition. Each pollywog takes turns kissing the material off his stomach. Importantly, they must swallow. Perhaps the oldest tradition, the barber visit, requires pollywogs to endure a haphazard head shaving. This tradition is reportedly one of the pollywogs’ favorites, as the barber gives each sailor a head massage.

At the moment of the line crossing, chaos erupts. Some ships become very rowdy, cheering, hugging, and the like. Others break out into simulated orgies in which shellbacks hump pollywogs and force them to pantomime oral sex. In fact, historians have documented cases in which shellbacks will place objects inside pollywogs’ anuses and then remove them.

If a pollywog survives these trials and earns the respect of Neptune, he will be given an “equatorial baptism.” Each pollywog is reborn a shellback by being dipped in a saltwater pool prepared by shellbacks. If a pollywog fails, he must be thrown overboard (sent to Davy Jones’ locker) and begin the process anew.²

Crossing the line is but one star in a constellation of intricate homosocial rituals soldiers perform. Throughout history and across civilizations, war makers have engaged in complex ceremonies which bend gender hegemonies and sexual regimes.³ The military has been and continues to be a site for men to escape the gendered confines of their civilian lives and to connect with other men. In this paper, therefore, I ask: *How does heteronormativity—and its components (compulsive heterosexuality, queer repression, (toxic) masculinities, etc.)—inform the logics and motivations for enlistment?*

Ultimately, I argue that because heteronormativity creates negative stigmas around homosocial relationships, men seek other ways in which to be emotionally, physically, and sexually intimate with other men. The military, as a site currently and historically dominated by men,⁴ provides an ideal outlet for fulfilling this desire, one which is not only less plagued by heteronormative stigmas but that is also revered as particularly

1 See copy from a popular poster plastered across ships leading up to crossing: “*To those wogs, those sorry dogs, Those slippery, slimey [sic] sluts, Where between their thighs, No manhood lies, Their breath like that of their butts! We wonder why they even try, To fight with a lack of tact, While we all know the way to go Is to be a trusty SHELLBACK!*”

2 Information about the line crossing was sourced from Hersh 2002, Basham 2016, and Bronner 2006.

3 See literature review for examples.

4 The US military is roughly 84% men (Council on Foreign Affairs, 2020). Some militaries have more gender parity, though far more have fewer women, if any at all.

masculine.⁵ This combination of relative gender freedom and gender affirmation, I contend, significantly contributes to the motivations for enlistment. I feel it's important to emphasize that while my research focuses on queer reasons for enlistment, these motivations are far from the only that matter. The theory and results that follow, in no way, are meant to suggest that men's need for homosocial connection is the only—or even the primary—reason for enlistment. Economic need, family, culture, patriotism, etc. all certainly contribute to individual soldiers' motivations for enlistment. I simply aim to unearth another of these motivations: homosociality.

While war does not constitute an active variable in this thesis, it does shade its relevance. War—and its subsequent death toll—undergirds much of the work of international relations scholarship. My research, likewise, finds its relevance in that very grim place, with consequences not only for scholarship but also human life (and death). I'm studying enlistment logics—notably, only in non-conscription militaries (more on this in the limitations section); without enlistment, most militaries could not function. Furthermore, despite the growing queer international relations scholarship—what some have called the “queer turn”⁶—I feel that we are far from having exhausted the analytical value of queer lenses. In fact, I believe that reading war through a critical and queer lens promises new worlds of research which will have both significant theoretical and practical implications.

Thus, I spend the rest of this paper analyzing soldiers and their motivations for enlisting (even those who never see actual war) from a queer perspective. First, I will outline the relevant literature on queer theory, enlistment, and international relations. I will pay special attention to the specific methodological considerations demanded by a queer approach. Next, I will lay out my theory, arguing that the military provides a space for men to connect with each other that civilian society shames. In order to support this claim, I will employ a text-as-data approach to a subreddit of 37,065 military stories, looking for narratives about homosocial connection. In addition, I will analyze military recruitment advertisements for similar themes, demonstrating that this homosocial logic is present both for enlistment and recruitment. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of this paper and, most importantly, the next steps for constructing a larger queer explanation of war.

⁵ As I write about later, I do not wish to insinuate that soldiers are immune to heteronormative pressures; gender anxieties seem to preoccupy soldiers deeply. Nevertheless, these anxieties seem to be less pronounced and manifest differently than in civilian life.

⁶ See Melanie Richter-Montpetit's “Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex (in IR) But were Afraid to Ask: The ‘Queer Turn’ in International Relations” (2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section of the paper, I will briefly explore the relevant literature, ultimately arguing that heteronormativity dwells in the shadows of the extant research on enlistment logics and ought to be brought to the forefront. First, though, I aim to outline the history of the relevant literatures, namely work by gender and sexuality scholars who study warmaking and by IR scholars who employ queer approaches. My research adds to both of these canons, and it is therefore essential that I demonstrate this thesis's position within this constellation of research—additionally, I use a great deal of terminology from these literatures in my theory that I define in this section. Finally, I will highlight the few scholars who have specifically examined enlistment logics, and, in doing so, demarcate the gap I aim to fill with my theory of heteronormativity.

Gender Genealogies: How the Military Became a Site for Studying Gender

The language used by the architects of war (generals, politicians, etc.), nuclear scientists, and soldiers is mired in highly gendered and sexually violent language (Cohn 1987; Ruskola 2010). For example: countries penetrate and rape each other; technologically inferior states envy the size and power of technologically superior countries' phallic missiles; unbombed territory is referred to as "virgin"; and genius men "birth" bombs. It quickly became clear to the gender and sexuality epistemological community that there was something especially pronounced—and therefore especially studiable—in the gender dynamics of the military. But why? What about the military brings out the extremes of gendered language (and gender performance)?

Enter stage right: hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is the process by which certain men's dominant position over women and marginalized masculinities is reified and justified (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). This process rewards specific masculine traits and shames and/or demeans all other gendered traits in order to maintain and grow the patriarchy. In the western world, aggressiveness, sexual domination, physical strength, and the ability to suppress emotions are among the most valued characteristics by the masculine hegemony. Incidentally (or perhaps not), the military requires many of these traits from its soldiers (Manjikian 2016; Barrett 1996). Not only does the military expect its participants to live up to the hegemonic masculinity standards, it shapes these standards for the broader world: "The military is a prime candidate for the study of masculinity, not only because it is an institution populated with men, but also because it plays a primary role in shaping images of masculinity in the larger society" (Barrett 1996 pg. 129). The military permeates popular culture, appearing in books, movies, and TV shows on the daily. Without failure, the media depicts military life as the pinnacle of hegemonic masculinity: These soldiers and generals are the men's men who protect their nation (populated by women, children, and subordinate men). The military, therefore, occupies an important role in the (re)production of gender dynamics; it is the site where the hegemonic gender identity is produced and reproduced. It's no wonder, then, that, within the military itself, gender performances become heightened and gendered language sharpens.

Scholars, as I've demonstrated, agree that the military generates a flavor of masculinity that plays an extremely important role in the broader gender ecosystem. Yet, little work has been done to examine *why* men feel so propelled to emulate this flavor of masculinity or why they desire to join the military (from a gender and sexuality perspective). Nevertheless, many scholars, especially within the last decade, have applied a gender and sexuality lens to international relations. I will now examine that literature and how it informs my research.

Bending the Field: Queer International Relations

Judith Butler argues that gender is performed (Butler 1990). But who performs it? While Butler ostensibly designed their theory with human beings in mind, in 1998 Cynthia Weber extended this theory to

include states. Weber posits that, like people, states perform gender. States use masculinities and femininities to signal resolve, aggression, allyship, etc.; they adapt to the gender environment they're in; and they can act in queer ways (Weber 1998). Weber's development of the gender performance thesis ushered in a queer international relations era. Gender, from then on, became an essential variable for making sense of state behavior.

Immediately following Weber, scholars began studying and continue to study how masculinity shapes the international system and how the international system shapes masculinity (Hooper 1999; Kirby 2016). Feminist scholars then critiqued the male-centric approach to studying gender in international relations and wondered how women leaders fit into the equation. As it turns out, women leaders often act even more masculinely than their male counterparts in an attempt to distance themselves from their femininity (Schwartz & Blair 2020). Additionally, gender has been used to resolve and/or modify long standing IR theories, such as the offense-defense balance (Wilcox 2009). Clearly, the last 20 have seen a queer boom in IR (Weber 2016).

Importantly, though, a gender and sexuality lens has not been applied to research examining soldiers' motivations for enlistment. This lacuna prevents the field from fully understanding and predicting military behaviors.

A Heteronormativity-Sized Hole

Understanding why people enlist represents a central question for militaries. Militaries in non-conscription societies must constantly find ways to fill and refill the barracks; studying enlistment motivations helps these militaries refine their recruitment strategies to maximize the number and quality of prospective soldiers. Yet, despite the obvious importance enlistment logics carry, the subject has been of relatively little concern to political scientists and scholars in general. Regardless, a handful of scholars have looked into enlistment logics. In this section, I will briefly review those works and argue that heteronormativity lurks in the background, contributing the results these scholars have observed.

While militaries almost certainly conduct regular surveys of their recruits' reasons for enlistment, that data remains undisclosed to the public. Luckily, some scholars have conducted their own survey research. As it turns out, among young men in the US, the top reasons for enlistment include the desire to: be physically challenged, develop teamwork skills, develop self-discipline, and experience adventure (Eighmey 2006).¹ These results challenge the assumption that prospective soldiers are motivated by the desire to defend their country and grow their careers. While both of these reasons play a role in enlistment logic, they are not the main factors for the survey populations (Eighmey 2006).

Other research supports the conclusion that social reasons propel men to enlist. Leonard Wong—through an examination of World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the war in Iraq—concludes that soldiers enlist “to fight for each other” (Wong 2003). Wong quotes S.L.A. Marshall to sum up his hypothesis: “Men do not fight for a cause but because they do not want to let their comrades down.” Wong along with Eighmey point to a deeply social pressure behind enlistment decisions. Nevertheless, no scholar has interrogated where these social pressures come from and why they are so powerful. This is precisely the gap I aim to fill. I argue that behind these desires to work with others, experience adventure, be physically challenged, etc.—and behind this fear of failing their peers—the longing for homosocial intimacy lives. The results of the few studies which look explicitly at enlistment logics can be explained by my theory of heteronormativity; men long for intimacy with other men and this longing manifests as the aforementioned desires and fears. In the next section, I explain exactly how my theory works.

¹ Notably, the women in this survey seemed to be relatively more motivated by patriotism and career goals. This difference strengthens my claim that homosocial connections are important for male enlistment logics, as the social motives seem less important for women—and women tend to struggle less with homosocial connections.

THE THEORY

Tight tights. Fabulous capes. Dramatic masks—for anonymity, of course. And, perhaps, a sidekick with boyish good looks. Superheroes.

They have long represented the pinnacle of masculinity. After all, Superman is a super *man*; he inevitably defeats the queer-coded villain, saves the day, and gets the girl. Yet, despite existing at this imagined horizon of masculinity, superheroes defy many of the behavioral expectations associated with masculinity. The emotional lives of supers almost always play deeply important roles in the plot—with orphans, outcasts, and hopeless romantics alike, emotions propel these men, and they show their feelings on the screen and page, often in ways the men reading or watching wouldn't dare. Additionally, superheroes develop deep relationships with other men—see Batman and Robin; Captain America and Bucky Barnes; Reed Richard and Ben Grimm; etc. These relationships occasionally verge on queer, and are almost always portrayed as homoerotic (Schott 2009).

Why can these mammoths of masculinity behave so... unmasculinely?

The answer, I contend, has to do with the lynch-pin of my theoretical framework: exceptionality. The very categorization of superhero secures the masculinity of the superhero. These men need not preoccupy themselves with proving their masculinity; they were written to define masculinity, to be the progenitors of hegemonic masculinity. They are exceptional, super even. This exceptionality allows these men to stray from the strict gender confines their writers and readers live. They are the buff, flying, laser-eye-having gender fantasy of men weighed down by a pernicious heteronormativity. But they are not the only exceptions.

I argue that soldiers, much like superheroes, exist in an exceptional environment, one in which social norms affirm their masculinity to such a degree that they can connect with each other more intimately than they can in their civilian lives.¹ I theorize that this intimacy *pulls* men toward the military, that men seek homosocial intimacy and know that the military provides it. I assume the other side of this coin, that men's lack of homosocial connection in their civilian lives *pushes* them toward the military. The composite image, then, is one of refuge, escape. Heteronormativity prevents men from connecting with each other. They, in an attempt to satisfy this need, enlist in the military, where homosocial intimacy is socially permissible and even expected. Of course, many other factors might influence an individual's decision to enlist. My theory does not pretend to be total; rather, I suggest that heteronormativity plays an important role in the motivation of soldiers to enlist.

In this section, I present the theoretical framework I use to answer my central question: *How does heteronormativity inform the logics of military enlistment in non-conscription countries?* First, I briefly support an assumption I make—that men struggle to connect with each other outside of the military. Next, I develop a novel theory of exceptionality and further discuss the role exceptionality plays in forming the gendered imaginary of the military. Then, I explore the product of this military exceptionality: homosocial intimacy. I present a typology of homosocial intimacies (emotional, physical, and sexual) and explain how and why the military permits each one, ultimately arguing that the accepted existence of these homosocial intimacies influences men to enlist.

The Heteronormativity Assumption

As will become clearer later in the theory, I rely heavily on the premise that men struggle to find homosocial connection due to heteronormative pressures that plague most societies. While, in an ideal world,

¹ While I chose to include the analogy of the superhero due to its cultural accessibility and consequent heuristic utility, I want to be clear that the fantasy of the superhero is not identical to the reality of the soldier. Soldiers, unlike superheroes, face a constant gender anxiety that they must address by engaging in certain rituals and behaviors that affirm their gender. The case of the military is far more nuanced than that of the superhero.

I would produce my own data to prove this premise, I have insufficient space to do so for the purposes of this thesis. Luckily, gender and sexuality scholars have documented this phenomenon incredibly well.

One year following Butler's release of "Gender Trouble," Michael Warner coined the term "heteronormativity" in order to highlight the social dominance heterosexuality has over other sexualities (Warner 1991). Heteronormativity, as it is used today, refers to "a hegemonic system of norms, discourses, and practices that constructs heterosexuality as natural and superior to all other expressions of sexuality" (Robinson pg. 1 2016). In other words, heteronormativity expresses the idea that heterosexuality is normal, and that all other sexualities are abnormal or deviant. Recently, the term has been broadened to include not only sexuality, but gender as well (to an extent). Heteronormativity compels people not only to *be* straight (or stay in the closet), but also to *act* straight. Gender and sexuality flow through each other, and it is often difficult, if not impossible, to parse them. Heteronormativity, as a framework, accounts for the fact that through performing one's gender one also performs their sexuality. Therefore, straight people can be affected by homophobia. They are expected to perform their gender in a straight manner. This is especially true for men.

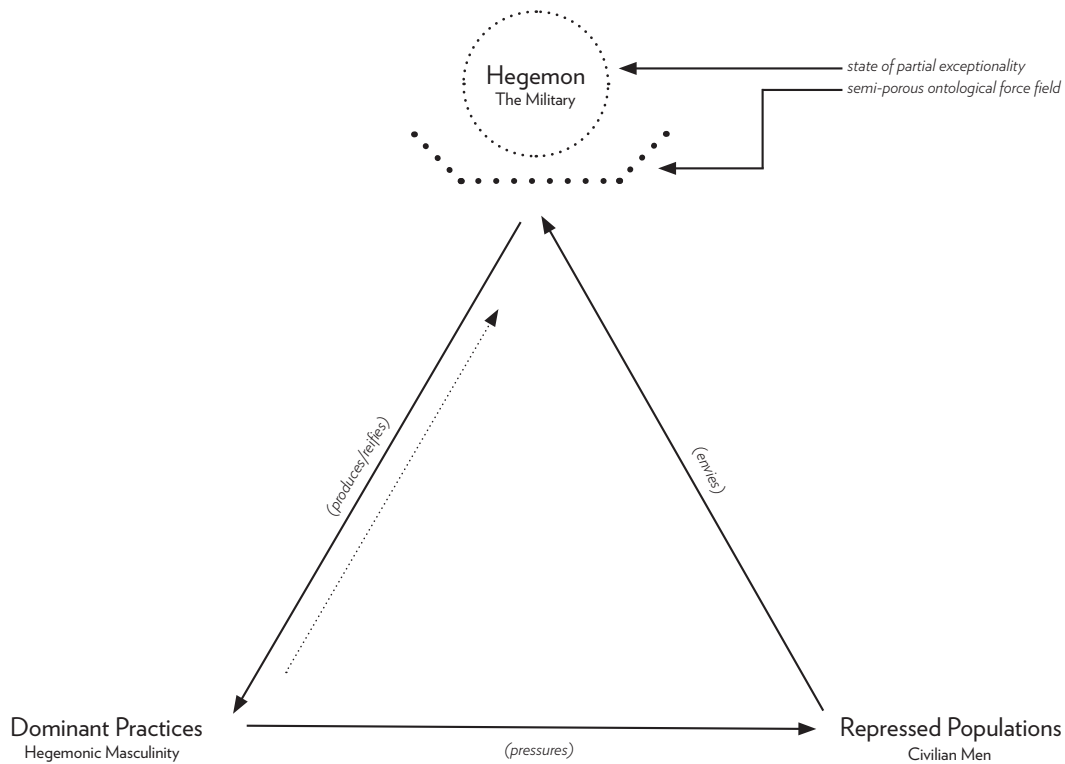
Men avoid various forms of homosocial intimacy because of the fear that they may be perceived as gay (Blumenfeld 1992). This intimacy avoidance takes many forms, from failing to create deep emotional bonds with other men to never touching other men. While heteronormativity affects women too, there seems to be a more pernicious stigma around homosocial intimacy between men than there is between women. Women can be emotionally vulnerable with each other and even physically affectionate without fear of being labeled gay. Men, on the other hand, must maintain an image of hyperheterosexuality by distancing themselves from their gender peers.

Feminists refer to this hyperheterosexuality and its negative derivatives as "toxic masculinity." In the 1980s, Shepherd Bliss coined the term in order to describe "his father's militarized, authoritarian masculinity" (Harrington 2020). If heteronormativity is the system of norms that rewards straight behavior and punishes queer behaviors, toxic masculinity represents the way these norms manifest in individuals, especially men. As the scholars I've cited in this section argue, heteronormativity hurts *everybody* through toxic masculinity which propels violence against women, homophobia, and male isolation. Of course, not all parties are affected equally. Marginalized identities exist in a far more precarious state than others do; however, for the purposes of this thesis, it's important to recognize that heteronormativity does in fact stifle the social and emotional lives of all people, including men. And this stifling, therefore, creates a need for men to find homosocial connection.

From Unacceptable to Exceptional: The Military as a Gender Refuge

From Karl Marx to Antonio Gramsci, hegemony has provided an essential framework for making sense of power relations for many prominent theorists. Hegemony, however, often eludes a clear and consistent definition. Some use hegemony to simply mean the domination of one group over another. Others believe hegemony to mean something much more specific and complicated. For the purposes of this paper, I define hegemony as follows: A system in which the hegemon—a person or group of persons (i.e. a state, gender, class, etc.)—wields a plurality of power.² This *relative* power differential forces repressed parties—those with less power—to bend to the preferences of the hegemon, often through mechanisms of internalization and naturalization. As I demonstrated in the literature review, the military exists as a hegemon vis-a-vis the practice

² But *what is power?* Consulting thinkers such as Max Weber and Thomas Hobbes will reveal a primitive, though important, understanding of power: brute force (Weber 1921; Hobbes 1651). While the ability to control one's surrounding vis-a-vis force, legitimately or otherwise, certainly plays an integral role in the establishment of hegemony, brute force represents but one small part of this very nuanced story. Thus, I read power through a Foucaultian lens, choosing instead to focus on the constitutive nature of power. Foucault sees power as the ability to define reality, to shape norms, practices, and the like. Brute force, therefore, represents one of many many paths to power, though surely not the sole path. Most importantly, though, I emphasize the duplicity of power Foucault first noted. "Power is tolerable only on the condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (Foucault 1976). Hegemony relies on the opacity of power; in order to convince the repressed to internalize their subordination, they must believe that their oppressor is their savior. Through a Foucaultian reading of power, we can understand how a powerful entity might be able to achieve this extraordinary feat.



How Exceptionality Works within Hegemony

FIGURE 1

of hegemonic masculinity; it sets the standards for the masculine aesthetic. Despite the robust literature on hegemony, however, it remains unclear exactly how the military can be both the source of so much of the content of masculinity while also a site in which soldiers feel less oppressed by said masculinity.

I aim to fill this theoretical lacuna by positing that hegemony creates a force field of ontological security around the hegemon that protects it—to a degree—from its own hegemonic pressures.³ In fact, I argue that this very exceptionality counterintuitively (re)produces the hegemonic order.

Ontological security describes the “security of self” one possesses—it is the confidence an actor has in its identity, its ontology (Mitzen 2006). I contend that hegemonies, due to their superordinate position, experience less anxiety about their ontology. I do not mean to say that they experience none—indeed, ontological insecurity likely propels hegemonies to maintain and grow their hegemony—however, in comparison to their repressed counterparts, it seems reasonable to conclude that hegemonies feel relatively more confident in their identities. After all, they are the ones defining the boundaries of identity itself. Due to this increased ontological security, hegemonies need not perform their identities as rigidly as the repressed must; hegemonies enjoy a freer existence, one in which they often defy the very norms they impose.

Of course, this defiance might be considered hypocrisy. Why, then, do the repressed not protest? Why does this hypocrisy not lead to the dethroning of the hegemon? I posit that the exceptionality/hypocrisy of the hegemon facilitates the maintenance and growth of its superpositionality. Because the relationship between the hegemon and the repressed is not merely a relationship of fleeting domination but one of internalized superiority/inferiority, one which the repressed take as natural, the hegemon escapes critical scrutiny. Furthermore, the hegemon often represents a horizon for the repressed, a telos of freedom from hegemonic pressures. The projection of the repressed onto the hegemon fortifies the hegemony. The fantasy of freedom

³ This protection is partial and only notable when read in comparison to the effects heteronormativity has on civilian men. Soldiers, undoubtedly, still face deep seated gender pressures, pressures that their status as soldiers might mitigate or simply transform into a different—yet still deleterious—form.

distracts the repressed from their oppression and, worse, causes them to envy the hegemon. In order to quench their jealousy, the repressed try as hard as possible to emulate the hegemon, thus reproducing the hegemonic practices.

This framework applies to many hegemonies; from cultural to international, hegemons tend to say one thing and do another. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this thesis, I'm interested in using this heuristic to understand how heteronormativity influences enlistment. I contend that the military occupies the role of hegemon with the masculine hegemony, though many other actors might also exist as hegemons too (athletes, politicians, movie stars, etc.). As a hegemon, the military and the people who populate it possess relatively high ontological security when it comes to masculinity. Due to this security, soldiers are freer to stray from masculine norms (though certainly not entirely free). Civilian men see this combination of gender affirmation and gender freedom soldiers enjoy and desire the same. This envy primes them to emulate the masculine standards the military touts as valuable (at least outwardly facing). The result is a vicious cycle of norm production and reproduction, fueled by the masculine power differentials between civilian men and soldiers.

However, understanding the relationship between the military, civilian men, and masculinity in this way, suggests that the military represents a gender refuge for men, that within the military men are freer to be intimate with one another. Now that I've explained the mechanisms of how that freedom (intimacy) comes about, I will dive into the intimacy itself.

Intimacies

My core hypothesis is that the lack of homosocial connection in civilian life caused by heteronormativity pushes men towards enlistment because they know that they will be able to find that connection in the military. However, I have yet to identify what homosocial connection looks like and which types of connection matter for my thesis. In this subsection, I present a typology of homosocial intimacy and theorize the importance of each type.

First, though, I will explain what I mean by intimacy. Intimacy, in a broad sense, refers to interpersonal closeness—the experience of connection with another. As psychologists, poets, and historians will agree, intimacy constitutes a fundamental part of the human experience. Without intimacy, we feel isolated, unfulfilled, and lost. Profound connection—intimacy— is something all people need and will seek out until achieved.

Typology of Intimacies

Emotional	Physical	Sexual
A closeness between individuals that stems from the sharing of feelings, a strong sense of trust, vulnerability, etc.	A closeness between individuals achieved through nonsexual touching	A closeness between individuals achieved through sex and sexual touching

FIGURE 2

Emotional Intimacy

Emotional intimacy refers to a closeness between individuals that stems from the sharing of feelings, a strong sense of trust, vulnerability, etc. This dimension of intimacy plays a pivotal role in the wellbeing of all people as it is the primary mechanism through which we develop meaningful relationships. Emotional intimacy allows us to process our feelings externally, find validation, and feel supported. Unfortunately, heteronormativity heavily stigmatizes this form of closeness between men. Men, in order to be seen as proper men, must avoid homosocial emotional connection, as emotional connection between men approximates homosexuality in the gendered imaginary. Thus, men are discouraged from crying, asking each other for emotional advice or support, or expressing their feelings of love for one another. In my theoretical apparatus, this dearth of homosocial emotional intimacy leaves an enormous gap in the social emotional needs of civilian men. Later, I will demonstrate how these needs are met when men join the military.

Physical Intimacy

Physical intimacy refers to a closeness between individuals achieved through nonsexual touching. Human bodies require touch in order to maintain health (Halton 2021). Hugging, cuddling, hand holding, etc. all produce deeply essential chemicals in the body. Like with emotional intimacy, though, physical intimacy between men rarely aligns with gender norms. Two men touching each other too closely resembles queer intimacy and thus cannot be allowed under the heteronormative regime. However, different to emotional intimacy, homosocial physical intimacy does have a restricted place in civilian life. Men may touch the bodies of other men *through* certain activities such as sports, play, or fighting. These mediated intimacies, while far from sufficient, allow men to connect with each other in this dimension to some degree. In the military, though, this type of intimacy increases in frequency and intensity, as I will demonstrate later.

Sexual Intimacy

Sexual intimacy refers to a closeness between individuals achieved through sex and sexual touching. Like emotional and physical intimacy, sexual intimacy represents an important part of adult health and wellbeing. Unlike the previous dimensions, however, sexual closeness between men is necessarily queer. While a man need not be gay to engage in sexual activity, sex between men is definitionally homosexual. Thus, this type of intimacy occupies a slightly different position than the other two in that queerness no longer lurks in the shadows, a specter; rather, queerness sits front and center. As such, my theory focuses least on this dimension. Many scholars have documented the lives of gay men in the military—and while that work is deeply important—my paper focuses on gender more than sexuality. Nevertheless, as I will prove later on, ostensibly-heterosexual soldiers do engage in homosexual acts quite frequently during their service. I contend that this fluidity has to do with the suspended gender norms in the military, that most men desire physical closeness with other men and that sex is often the vehicle through which they satisfy that desire. Furthermore, homoeroticism plays an important part in the gendered ecosystem of military enlistment, particularly from the recruitment side of the equation.

An Honorable Discharge from the Dos and Don'ts: Rituals and Rites

While exceptionality does a lot of the heavy lifting in explaining the broadest theoretical reasons why military personnel might be able to depart from some heteronormative practices, I certainly do not wish to

imply that soldiers are immune from heteronormativity. In fact, I suspect they wrestle with these pressures daily—though in largely different ways than their civilian counterparts. Thus, I find it necessary to ponder the nuanced question of *how* soldiers depart from norms, especially at the beginning of their tenure.

To this question, I offer ritual as a potential answer. While I argue that soldiers on the whole are primed to act against the heteronormative regime due to their elevated positionality within said regime, the internalized norms of right and wrong gender behaviors cannot simply dissipate overnight. Gender anxiety, while relieved in part by one's belonging to a progenitor of heteronormative masculinity such as the military, must be further eased in order to permit rich homosocial intimacy. Ritual—a socially predetermined cascade of actions or mode of habit—addresses the lingering gender anxieties of soldiers by substituting heteronormative practices with a new set of norms; the comforting structure of ritual replaces the familiar structure of heteronormativity, allowing this behavioral departure. To ask a soldier to connect with another man—whether emotionally, physically, or sexually—might still trigger fear of homosexual accusations. Through the medium of ritual, however, the military signals that the behavior in question is not only acceptable but expected.

This recalibration into a new normative order is particularly important at the beginning of a soldier's military career. At the beginning of their service, soldiers are still socialized as civilians, even if their status within the hegemonic order has changed. It makes sense, then, that many of these heteronormative departure rituals occur as rites of passage during academy, boot camp, and the early days of service (Çaya 2016). Scholars, movie directors, and activists alike have long documented the ways in which the military “breaks down” its new recruits, indoctrinates them; the term boot camp, after all, likely conjures images of men crawling through mud, drill sergeants shouting “maggot,”⁴ and soldiers being subjected to seemingly needless exercises in obedience. I argue that through these denigrating rites of passage in which the military explicitly aims to erase its soldiers' identities, new recruits find a new relationship with their gender identities, one in which they are freer to connect with other men.

A Brief Note on Scope

I want to be clear about the boundaries of my theory. Firstly, as I've mentioned in passing, this theory applies only to non-conscription militaries. Because I'm analyzing enlistment logics, my theory cannot be applied to militaries populated by forced or coerced soldiers. Soldiers of this type cannot “escape” gender pressures because to escape implies choice, deliberate action. Nevertheless, I can imagine a world in which conscription militaries utilize the promise of gender refuge as a tool to ease resistance to the draft (a sort of silver lining). Thus, I think a comparative study between conscription and at-will militaries with regard to heteronormativity might yield interesting supplementary results.

Additionally, one variable I've intentionally left out of my theory, though that is very important, is that of war itself. Most militaries are not at war most of the time. How does wartime affect enlistment logics vis-a-vis heteronormativity? This variation is important and deserves further consideration in future research.

Finally, how do women fit into this equation? While women make up only a small proportion of most militaries, surely their experiences within this gender ecosystem differ from those of their male counterparts. Are they, like female world leaders, expected to act with hypermasculinity? More pertinently, how does their presence affect male homosocial behavior? If a man can connect with a woman, has he no need to connect with other men?

⁴ While no conclusive etymological work has been done to trace the origins of the usage of “maggot” as a military pejorative, I suspect that its similarity to the word “faggot”—if not part of the story of its origin—certainly aids in its diminutive effect.

METHODOLOGY

In this section, I briefly explain and justify the methodologies I will use to demonstrate the heteronormative logics at play in military enlistment. Additionally, I provide the necessary context about the data used and tie my approach to my theoretical apparatus.

The General Approach

My theory posits that heteronormative pressures push civilian men toward enlistment and that opportunities for homosocial connection pull civilian men toward enlistment. As I mentioned in the last section, I rely on extant research to affirm the existence of heteronormative pressures in quotidian life; my empirics focus, instead, on tracking the augmented homosocial connections present in the military. Tacit within my theory is the assumption that civilian men know they will experience ontological security by enlisting and will, therefore, be able to connect with other men. If they didn't know that the military promised gender refuge, my theory could not work. Thus, in addition to analyzing the internal reality of the military's gender ecosystem, I also need to understand how civilian men come to know about that ecosystem.

Thus, I employ a two-pronged approach. In order to gauge the internal reality of the military, I will analyze stories from soldiers shared amongst each other in a subreddit called *r/militarystories*. Then, to understand how this internal reality is marketed to civilian men, I will analyze military recruitment advertisements. This two-sided approach promises to engage with the most essential elements of my theoretical framework: the homosocial connections in the military and the way those connections are mobilized to recruit civilian men¹.

For each type of intimacy (emotional, physical, and sexual), I will pull out posts that exemplify the type, paying special attention to the language the poster uses. Similarly, for each intimacy, I will also select ads that mobilize the promise of the respective intimacy to entice prospective soldiers.

Analyzing Soldiers' Stories

Due to the short timeframe of this project, I wasn't able to interview a large number of soldiers myself—which was my initial plan. Instead, I had to get creative about how to observe an environment infamously closed off to civilians. Luckily, with the advent of the internet, it turns out soldiers—like most communities—have found each other online. The subreddit, *r/militarystories*, boasts an impressive 128,000 subscribers and thousands of testimonials detailing soldiers' intimate experiences while serving. While I was initially disappointed with not being able to conduct interviews, I realized that analyzing these posts promises massive benefits that interviews lack. For example, due to the sensitive nature of my research topic, I highly doubt many soldiers would feel comfortable telling me about their intimate homosocial experiences. Due to the anonymity this platform provides, soldiers are more likely to share their homosocial experiences online. Furthermore, even if I had 3 years to complete this paper, I couldn't hope to analyze the number of stories I'm able to on through this subreddit—I scraped 37,065 stories. Of course, with interviews, I would be certain that all stories come from bonafide soldiers. Anyone, theoretically, can post to this subreddit. However, the rules on the page prohibit impersonation and fabrication—the moderators often remove posts that seem incongruous with their knowledge of institutional norms.

¹ My two sources of data come from two separate centuries (the 20th and 21st). The fact that they both demonstrate similar patterns suggests a stickiness of this phenomena that spans time and place and is not specific to any one area or era.

The Data

While qualitative analysis constitutes the main thrust of my qualitative approach, I enter into my exploration of the internal gender reality of the military quantitatively. I scraped roughly 37,065 posts from the subreddit r/militarystories, from January 24, 2014 to early January 2023. The data comes from soldiers in a wide variety of western countries, including but not limited to: the US, Canada, the UK, France, and Poland. I will discuss this limitation later in the paper. I organized each post so as to show the name of the poster (almost always a pseudonym), the date, the title, the content, the number of upvotes, and some other metadata. It's important to note that this subreddit, while not only for men, is very clearly dominated by men. R/militarystories' express purpose is "... to tell your stories of your service, or that of close family." Likely due to extreme gender disparity in the military, this forum too seems to be predominantly populated by soldiers who identify as men. My unedited scrape can be found in the git page for this project.

Sorting the Data

In order to make sense of 37,065 posts, I first read many of them. While this is not an ethnographic study, understanding the language, norms, and modes of interaction within this community was essential—without this understanding, any quantitative approach to sorting the data would be woefully misinformed. So, once I had a strong grasp on the community norms, I used various text-as-data methods to understand trends in the posts. From topic modeling to simple word clouds (see Figures 3 and 4), I explored the data from 30,000 feet. Early on, themes of homosocial intimacy stood out. One of the most prominent topics in the topic model relates to gay sex and homophobia. With this big picture data in hand, I was satisfied with my initial exploration of the subreddit and was ready to find specific posts to analyze. In order to do so, I compiled a list of keywords² having to do with each type of intimacy and used the key words in context package to find the 5 words before and after each keyword. This approach allowed me to find individual posts related to my themes of interest. I then extracted those posts for analysis (see results).

Analyzing Recruitment Advertisements

Accessing recruitment data for militaries proved much easier than finding data about the military's internal gender ecosystem. The Library of Congress offers a comprehensive collection of recruitment advertisements spanning the history of the US military, including ads from France and Germany. Almost all of my data comes from the Library. However, in my readings, I did find a few exemplary ads which I use in my analysis that do not come from the Library. In the results section, I note where each ad comes from, and if it didn't come from the Library, I independently verify it.

In order to identify relevant ads, I went through the Library's catalog and extracted examples I thought relevant. I want to note that this method disregards data that isn't relevant to my thesis. There were many ads which had seemingly nothing to do with homosocial connection. This analysis, in no way, purports anything about military ads in general. Rather, I use these ads as a way to understand one recruitment logic in a sea of logics.

² Reproducible data available on Github ([gagegramlik/intricate_rituals](https://github.com/gagegramlik/intricate_rituals))

Emotional Intimacy

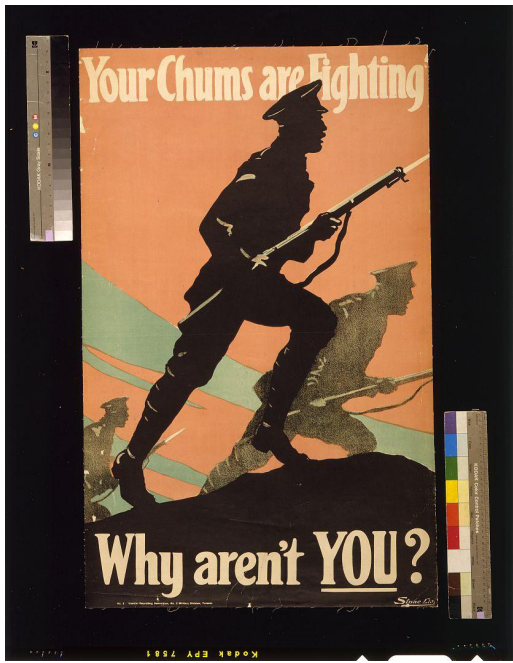


FIGURE 5

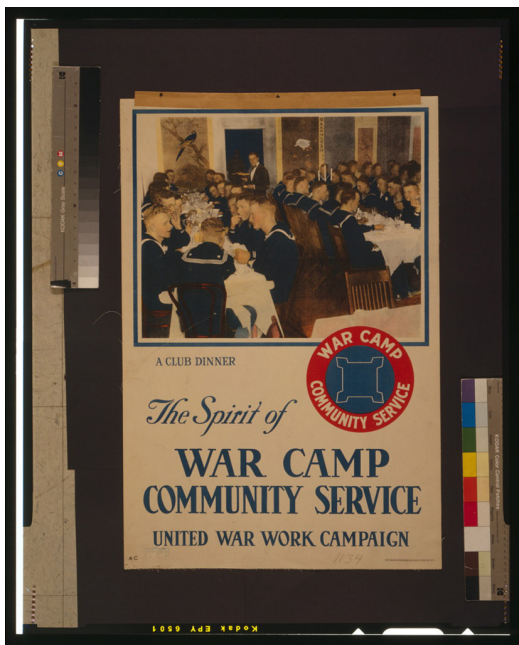


FIGURE 6

gathered, refers to the experience of crying involuntarily; like a ninja, tears sneak up on the soldiers, and, like an onion, the ninja makes the soldiers cry. Despite the semantic distancing from their vulnerability vis-à-vis the onion ninja euphemism, the openness with which these men discuss crying defies heteronormative expectations to an astonishing degree. “Real men don’t cry” represents perhaps the most recognizable maxim of heteronormativity. Yet, these men frequently share their experiences with succumbing to the emotional weight of their realities. The invocation of their status as soldiers, manly men, and warriors during these tear-ridden posts suggests a direct connection between the superordinate position of the military in the masculine order and soldiers’ ability to speak freely about their emotions. Thus, I contend that the posts in TABLES 1 and 2 constitute strong evidence for increased homosocial, emotional intimacy in the military.

My results indicate a clear prevalence of homosocial, emotional intimacy within the military that has been used for decades to recruit men. In this subsection, I highlight patterns within the subreddit and specific posts that demonstrate pronounced homosocial, emotional intimacy. Additionally, I curate various military recruitment advertisements which capitalize on the promise of homosocial, emotional intimacy in order to showcase how this form of closeness influences enlistment logics.

Entering into this project, I anticipated finding posts which discuss the emotional bonds veterans formed while serving. While these posts do pepper the subreddit, I was surprised to find a much more popular example of emotional intimacy: earnest messages between soldiers on the subreddit itself. In real time, these veterans posted deeply personal, vulnerable, and earnest messages—messages which, according to literature on homosocial norms, should not be so prevalent. They thank each other for sharing stories, commiserate over their struggles with mental health, and frequently tell each other “love you” (see TABLE 1 in the appendix).

Post 6700 encapsulates a pervasive sentiment I noticed throughout the corpus: The fear that homosocial vulnerability might undermine one’s “manliness.” Nevertheless, many posters acknowledge this narrative while defying it (as #6700 does). This dissonance between an acknowledged heteronormative pressure and the strong homosocial, emotional intimacy present in the posts indicates an augmentation of homosocial latitude in the military consistent with my theory. These soldiers know that their behavior might be considered abnormal but their superior position within the masculine order allows them to break gender norms.

In addition to proclamations of love for one another, these soldiers frequently “confess” to crying (see TABLE 2). This happens most in the comment sections of particularly heartfelt posts, such as those which discuss losing a compatriot on the field, suicide, or child death. Interestingly, soldiers often euphemistically refer to their bouts of emotional vulnerability as being attacked by the “onion ninja.” The onion ninja, I’ve

As I noted in my theory and methodology sections, analyzing the posts only proves the internal realities of the military, not that civilian men know these realities and are thus propelled to enlist. Therefore, I briefly provide a few military recruitment advertisements that capitalize on the promise of homosocial emotional closeness.

While more modern ads tend to lean into narratives about sacrifice, patriotism, and even heroism—all of which are consistent with the reddit posts with high emotional valences—ads from the 20th century in particular seem to leverage mens’ desire for homosocial friendship. Post after poster invokes some iteration of *the military is where your friends are*. Figure 5 explicitly guilt trips would-be soldiers by asserting that all of their male peers are fighting except for the reader of the ad. Figures 6 and 7, on the other hand, take a more positive approach, insinuating that the reader of the ad can find homosocial friendship through enlistment; they can relax in the mess hall with their friends as Figure 6 depicts or “be the fourth” in a game of cards as Figure 7 suggests. Interestingly, Figure 7 displays cards of the same suit: hearts. This subtle detail further communicates the promise of emotional connection by military recruiters.

These ads make clear the fact that homosocial, emotional intimacy is not merely a spontaneous phenomenon of military culture; rather, this closeness represents a main selling point for soldiers. Civilian men crave emotional connections with other men; the military promises to fulfill that desire.



FIGURE 7



FIGURE 8

barracks. Soldiers live in close quarters, resulting in humorous stories of clashing hygienic norms, unintentional touching, and pranks. While some posts speak of earnest physical closeness such as embracing their brothers in arms (see #5706), most achieve physical closeness through an almost campy lens. Soldiers touch each other jokingly, rarely seriously. Importantly, though, they do touch each other. While the earnestness evident within

Physical Intimacy

Parsing physical intimacy from sexual intimacy presents a unique empirical challenge. Most all sexual intimacy is physical, yet not all physical intimacy is sexual. In reading through the posts, it struck me how rare nonsexual examples of physical intimacy were. Post after post detailed sexual experiences between soldiers; yet, simple physical acts like hugs, cuddling, etc. were few and far between. I suspect that this relative lack of stories about physical intimacy has far more to do with the medium of communication rather than actual military norms. Unlike with emotional intimacy, physical intimacy cannot be replicated on reddit. Most of the emotional examples were active—they showed soldiers being emotional in real time. The same activeness cannot be achieved with physical intimacy on screen. Nevertheless, physical intimacy seems to play an important role in military culture, if less important than emotional and sexual intimacy.

The vast majority of nonsexual physicality stems from the literal closeness between soldiers necessitated by life in the barracks. Soldiers live in close quarters, resulting in humorous stories of clashing hygienic norms, unintentional touching, and pranks. While some posts speak of earnest physical closeness such as embracing their brothers in arms (see #5706), most achieve physical closeness through an almost campy lens. Soldiers touch each other jokingly, rarely seriously. Importantly, though, they do touch each other. While the earnestness evident within



FIGURE 9



FIGURE 10

These ads demonstrate a clear priority for military recruitment: the promise of homosocial, physical intimacy. Read alongside the reddit posts, an evident culture of augmented physical closeness within the military comes into view.

Sexual Intimacy

My results surprisingly indicate that soldiers achieve homosocial physical intimacy primarily through sexual intimacy. It's essential to note that the plurality of sexual intimacy examples do not necessarily constitute homosexual sex; rather, these soldiers tend to act in openly sexual ways which, in turn, bring them closer together on this dimension of intimacy. Again, while queer soldiers assuredly exist in all militaries, this thesis does not consider the gay soldier as its primary object of interest. Instead, I examine the ways in which soldiers discuss their bodies and sexualities and how they achieve closeness through sex.

The topic of penises and penis size in particular occupies such an important role in the corpus that

the emotional dimension remains relatively underdeveloped with regard to the physical dimension of intimacy, the corpus reveals an undeniable tendency for men to touch the skin of other men. Therefore, I maintain that the data from TABLE 3 affirms my original thesis: the military extends the realm of acceptable homosocial, physical intimacy.

Strangely, this augmented space of physical openness manifests most clearly in recruitment ads (even more clearly than in the posts). Aside from the occasional handshake, men avoid touching the skin of other men for fear of being labeled gay (as affirmed in my literature review). Yet, ad after ad shows men engaging physically with one another.

Figure 8, pulling on some of the sinews outlined in the emotional intimacy subsection, calls for men to work “together” by joining the war effort. In addition to the emotional appeal, however, the ad includes an image of men walking arm-in-arm, smiling from ear to ear. Similarly, Figure 9, a recent Instagram post from the US Army, captured a moment of jubilation in which uniformed men are—quite literally—jumping for joy. In the center of the photo, a muscular soldier shouts in celebration, his neck veins protruding animalistically. In the background, men embrace one another. The caption claims that cadet training feels like “confidence.” While I doubt the captioner meant to say that cadet training feels like gender confidence (i.e. ontological security), the physical openness alongside the clear euphoria in the photo suggests this form of assuredness, too. Finally, Figure 10—a drawing of an older soldier giving a younger soldier tea, his hand resting on the younger soldier’s shoulder—simply states “for your boy.” Despite the pederast undertones of the ad, it seems the ad makers wished to display a wholesome relationship between a senior and his protégé, a relationship in which physical closeness is natural.



FIGURE 11



FIGURE 12

intimacy, especially in a space that lacks the socially-acceptable touch of women.

Despite the taboos surrounding homosexuality and homosocial, sexual intimacy, sexual ads populate a large proportion of the recruitment archive. These ads reflect many of the themes present in the reddit corpus. For instance, the obsession with large penises can be seen in Figures 11, 12, and 13, which all depict soldiers using comically enlarged, phallically-shaped weapons. Figure 11 even emphasizes the importance of size by encouraging prospective soldiers to test the “big guns” themselves. Figure 12 makes more explicit the connection between the weapon and the penis by having the seaman ride the submarine

it showed up in the topic modeling. TABLE 4 highlights some of the posts which discuss penises. Notably, these soldiers boast a certain pride about showing their phalluses to each other. Genital exposure, in other contexts, might be considered homosexual; yet, because these soldiers purport to show their penises to one another in order to determine who is—quite literally—the manliest, they evade these connotations while also achieving sexual intimacy.

Nevertheless, gayness breaks the surface of some posts, soldiers speaking explicitly about gay relationships, homophobia, and the specter of queerness that haunts their daily interactions (see TABLE 5). Soldiers regularly mention “gay

chicken,” the practice in which two or more men see how far they can go (hand holding, hugging, kissing, etc.) without one of them “breaking” and giving up. By framing homosexual activity as a competition, the soldiers evade yet again the label of gay; instead, their very participation in gay sexual activity bolsters their masculinity because it means they are winning a competition.

As TABLES 6 and 7 demonstrate, however, soldiers do engage in sexual activity with each other and discuss their sexualities earnestly—not all sexual intimacy in the military is mediated through humor and masculine bravado. Ultimately, the reddit data demonstrates a wide breadth of sexual intimacies, all of which would almost assuredly face more ferocious stigmatization in civilian life. From this analysis, I contend that homosocial, sexual intimacy represents a key dimension of closeness for soldiers, one that is perhaps the most taboo of the three in civilian life. Additionally, sexual intimacy operates as a vehicle for physical

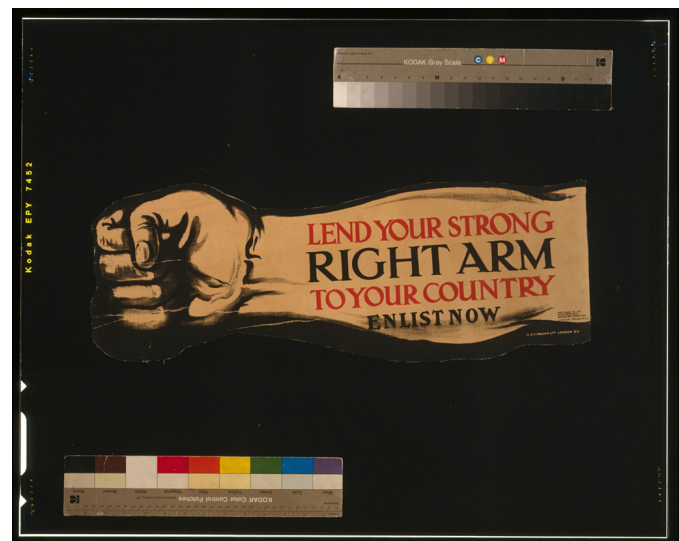


FIGURE 13



FIGURE 14



FIGURE 15

“sub” takes on a whole new meaning; instead of an abbreviation for submarine, it can be understood to mean “submissive.” Thus, the poster calls for men to enlist because they will have the opportunity to “operate” a high end “sub[missive]” twink.¹

The ads, read alongside the reddit posts, leave no doubt that homosocial, sexual intimacy plays a vital role in military culture. Men desire other men, whether physically, sexually, or both. The military provides a space for them to satisfy that desire, and it uses the promise of that satisfaction to convince civilian men to enlist.

as if it were a bull. Water splashes at the tip of the submarine, intimating even further that this poster harbors a double meaning. Additionally, Figure 13—a literal “right hand”—invokes masturbatory imagery inline with the posts from TABLE 7.

Figures 14, 15, and 16 echo the open admiration with the male figure seen in the corpus. With shirtless soldiers engaging in manual labor, their muscles bulging, the homoeroticism of these ads cannot be denied. Upon further inspection, though, these ads seem to not only invoke a homoerotic gaze but also a substantively homosexual meaning as well. For instance, Figure 14—a navy recruitment ad—artfully references the line crossing I detailed in the introduction by

stating that the soldiers in the drawing “have come across” the line. In conjunction with the depiction of shirtless men, one might read this crossing as a reference to three lines: the line between civilian and soldier, the equatorial line, and the line that divides heterosexuality from homosexuality. By enlisting, the ad promises men the opportunity to cross all three of these lines, to encounter a homosexual asylum of sorts. Figure 15, similarly, harbors a more salacious, secondary meaning. While, on the surface, the ad seems to call for submarine operators, claiming that enlistment will provide the reader the opportunity to man a 7M dollar submarine, the image on the poster begs for an additional consideration of messaging. The sole object of the ad—a young, shirtless, and skinny soldier—looks over his shoulder coquettishly at the reader, as if inviting him to flirt back. Read in this way, the use of the word

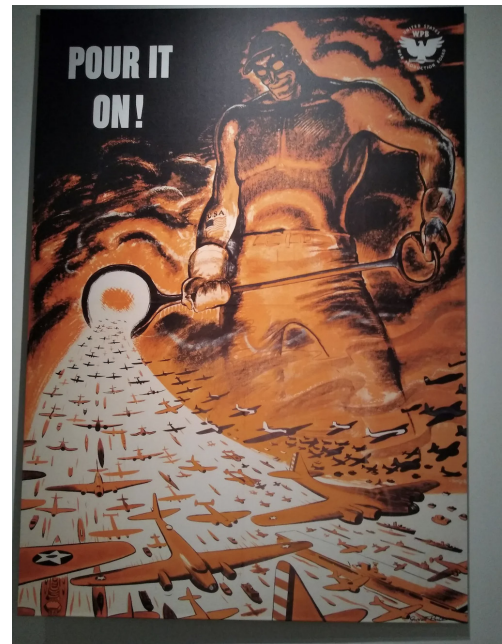


FIGURE 16

¹ Twink refers to a type of gay man who is often young, hairless, and skinny.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I argued that the military provides a space for men to be emotionally, physically, and sexually intimate with one another and that this increased latitude, in fact, propels men to enlist. I supported this claim by analyzing a subreddit of thousands of military stories from across the western world and military recruitment ads from the last century. My results, I contend, affirm my hypotheses firmly: soldiers do enjoy augmented homosocial intimacy in the military (relative to the civilian counterparts), and the military does leverage these intimacies in its recruitment ads.

Nevertheless, I would be remiss not to note the most important limitations of this brief study. Firstly, while I believe that my theory expands to most types of militaries, my empirical scope was limited to a handful of western nations, with a strong bias toward anglophone states, particularly the US. I suspect that expanding the sample size of my data to include non-western nations would result in interesting variations depending on the strength of heteronormativity in a given culture, the ways in which heteronormativity manifests (or doesn't), and other facets of military culture. Additionally, as I've mentioned, my research can make no claims about conscription militaries. All of the militaries I considered were at-will. My theoretical framework explicitly excludes conscription as a variable, though future researchers might want to explore how the removal of choice alters the gender landscape of the military. Finally, while war undergirds the entirety of this study, I neglect to bring war out of the shadows and into the light as a bona fide variable. Few soldiers from the subreddit have experienced anything but peacetime. It seems likely to me that enlistment logics would change in important ways during wartime; homosocial intimacy might not be as important if the prospect of death seems more likely. I would like to address these limitations and many more in future research, and I encourage other researchers to consider these gaps as well.

I'd like to end this thesis by looking to future projects—not just projects that address these limitations but also research that widens the boundaries of queer international relations theory. Kenneth Waltz provides a valuable heuristic for theory development in his discussion of levels of analysis (Waltz 1959). In this thesis, I'm largely concerned with the first and second levels of analysis; that is, I explored how individuals (first image) and the state (second image) interact. Yet, I think some of the most important observations about how heteronormativity functions in IR remain unexplored. Namely, how does heteronormativity operate within the international system (third image)? The work I did in this thesis, in many ways, builds to this very question. I have demonstrated the ways in which heteronormativity pushes men to enlist and how the state leverages heteronormativity to encourage men to enlist; the next step should be to examine how these pressures aggregate to influence system level norms.

War, in particular, seems a promising site for exploring the heteronormativity variable at the system level. Inter- and intrastate conflict remains one of the most devastating aspects of the modern world, one which breathes a pronounced relevance into both this thesis and any other scholarship that might consider the third image. I suspect that heteronormativity explains much of the mystery that is war studies. Perennial questions such as: why do states fight when both sides are guaranteed to lose substantial troops and resources?; how do leaders decide whether or not to engage in war?; and, why does war persist in the modern era? stand to be addressed, at least in part, by considering heteronormative pressures at the interstate level. Aggression, protectionism, honor, and strength—all virtues promulgated by hegemonic masculinity—also add dimension to the bellicose behavior in the IR system by suggesting that states face gendered pressures much like individuals.

I firmly believe that a better understanding of how heteronormativity—and gender in general—shape our international system promises solutions to problems many have written off as human nature. War, violence, oppression, and all other forms of deleterious asymmetries subsist off the narrative that their very existence is natural, unavoidable. Queer theory rejects these assumptions. War, under a queer lens, is not an inevitable telos of conflict; it is the product of constructed systems that can be deconstructed. International relations scholars must also challenge the beliefs we have allowed to silently seep into our subconscious. We must cross the line that separates the status quo from the future.

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1

Emotionally Intimate Posts That Discuss Homosocial Love

Quote from Post	Post ID #
much love to you, soldier	895
Folks like those 3 musketeers are why I love the military community. And please, please put those other stories on paper (figuratively). And most importantly, Thanks for sharing.	1062
Love ya, brother!	1978
<p>Christmas can always be an awkward time, no matter who you're with. You have one (1) *more* family than most people are issued... And honestly, they're both real family; some of them you love, some of them you'd love to go and punch right in the face, and pretty much all of them you'd fight and risk injury or worse to protect.</p> <p>Merry Christmas, though by now it's Boxing Day for you.</p>	2821
<p>Things do get better, I promise. It's a fight, a long fight, a hard fight, but they do. If you're struggling call someone, text someone, email, send damn smoke signals, but please, reach out. The end is the end, not a solution. We all want you here. Have hope. Be strong, be well. I don't personally know anyone on here, but I love you all. Thanks for listening, and happy veterans day.</p>	5256
<p>Back atchya, and to your lady too. I was raised that men didn't say "love" to each other except in church. So that craven insecurity was supposed to make you more "manly," right?</p> <p>I have news. It doesn't. Love you too, man - y'know in the manly way that isn't that *other* way that we're *never* going to talk about, *ever*.</p> <p>Now I'm laughing at myself. Such a *big* boy...</p>	6700
<p>I had to step away from my desk and take a walk on a hot California summer's day. While walking down Concord Blvd memories of Jessie flooded my mind. Yeah, I got emotional and I'm not going to apologize for it.</p> <p>Jessie had been killed in 2012 by a 16 year old driver who fell asleep at the wheel of a car. The driver was with her mother and she was on a learners permit. Jessie was riding his bike on the first day of a multi-day bicycle ride. I bear no anger against the 16 year old person who was driving the vehicle at the time of the accident, or her mother. Having something like that on a person's conscience must be a horrible thing. For both her and her mother I wish them peace.</p> <p>I'm now older than Jessie was at his death. I have all the things in my life that Jessie wanted so badly for himself; a loving wife, a child, a nice home and a garden. Damn, life can be so unfair. At his core Jessie was very good person who was struggling to swim to the surface of an ocean of shit his parents piled on him. Once more I did not get to say good bye.</p> <p>I miss you Jessie I love you</p>	9776

TABLE 2

Emotionally Intimate Posts That Discuss Crying and Demonstrate Vulnerability

Quote from Post	Post ID #
We both go from laughter to tears. I get off the escalator and give him a hug. We are both nearly hysterical with tears streaming down our faces, and we can barely stay upright. Which led to the police coming over to ask if I am ok...Which just set us off laughing again. It took about 10 minutes for Tre and I to calm down enough to explain to the cops we are fine, and head for his car. We sat in the car for another 20 minutes laughing, knowing that Brian would have been ROFL watching that.	935
Getting to hear where they were from and the fact that they as non-citizens, still enlisted knowing we were in the middle of 2 wars, but felt it was important enough to still do so. Getting to witness it, and seeing their smiles/happiness made me shed a couple tears. Definitely a top, "we all bleed the same... red, white and blue" moment for me!	1059
Thanks for letting us know. This sub has been an incredible source of entertainment for me as well as an occasion to ponder the more profound or drastic aspects of life. I have cried tears of joy and less joyful ones reading stories here. Thank you all.	1376
I'm a historically non-emotional person. But roll call at a memorial service breaks me. Just reading about it brings tears to my eyes as I recall the services I've attended over the years.	1856
Excellent writing. Brought a tear to my eyes. I love your writing. It's a great honor to Lieutenant Spencer. I hope you're doing okay buddy. Cheers.	1858
Both of your stories have brought tears to my eyes.	5118
Wow that was some intense reading and it brought tears to my eyes because I think I understand you.	5142
Dang onion-cutting ninjas! Seriously, though, THIS and the OP's story are so touching. Thank you for being an example of kind and gracious compassion.	927
Damned Ninjas and their onions! Thanks for sharing, condolences for Brian, and Semper Fi to him. Folks like those 3 musketeers are why I love the military community. And please, please put those other stories on paper (figuratively). And most importantly, Thanks for sharing.	1062
Grabs you in a big bear hug. Pushing off the onion ninjas. You are home man, you are safe, your lady is here, she will help and guide you. Be kind to yourself and get the help you need to get through this.	5076

TABLE 3

Physically Intimate Posts

Quote from Post	Post ID #
<p>After a couple of days, the whole platoon started to gel. We were all different, but about the same age, dressed the same, haircut the same and going through the same shit. Got to meet people I would have *never* met (at least on equal terms), got to know them better than a lot of folks back home that were my friends.</p> <p>So it was okay, almost a patriotic good, all of us living together. Then about two weeks in, there were about thirty of us taking a two minute shower all at once, and one of the Drill Sergeants had apparently received a complaint from Quartermaster Laundry.</p> <p>He stuck his head into the steamy shower bay and shouted, “Y’all be sure to wash your anus!” Wut? There are people here who don’t already know to do that? Who? WTF? I was culture-shocked all over again.</p> <p>Then one of the Ohio guys leaned over to me with a worried look. “What’s a *anus*?” he asked. Oh God.</p>	3182
<p>This very large young man in my “brother” company literally looked like a tank walking at you he was easily 6 and 1/2 ft tall and he was one solid mass of muscle (his biceps had biceps).</p>	3379
<p>Grabs you in a big bear hug. Pushing off the onion ninjas.</p> <p>You are home man, you are safe, your lady is here, she will help and guide you.</p> <p>Be kind to yourself and get the help you need to get through this.</p>	5076
<p>I had an NCO that was really homophobic, and that’s probably why he always got tasked with being a meat gazer. So when he had to watch me piss in a bottle I asked him to do a bunch of shit. “Hey sarge could you turn the faucet on please? The sound of running water will help me go faster.” “Hey sarge, do I need to drop my pants to the floor and hold my shirt up so you can make sure I don’t have a fake dick or something?” Etc. Then I’d proceed to sing a little song to my little guy to relax him while I tried to pee. He was fuuuuuurios but couldn’t really say shit, and he was certainly the most uncomfortable I ever saw in the few years I was in that unit.</p>	8823
<p>When the cup was all nice, clean and shiny I walked into one of the toilet stalls, closed the door and proceeded to introduce Captain Mac to the old Coast Guard tradition of Dick Swabbing.</p> <p>I had never dick swabbed anyone before let alone a Captain, but I had seen other enlisted’s dick swab officers numerous times in the past. I have seen dishes, flatware, beverageware, even a tube of chap stick dick swabbed. All were jerks that deserved it. I had come to view dick swabbing as an act by the powerless against the powerful. Dick swabbing is a classic act of passive aggressive behavior. If you are an officer and reading this thread, you have been warned. Be nice to the enlisted staff.</p> <p>I proceeded to rub the head of the little Bosun completely around the inner rim of the coffee cup, the top edge of the rim of the coffee cup and the outside upper rim of the coffee cup. The trick when dick swabbing is not to leave any short and curly hairs, or smegma behind as evidence. I tucked little Bosun back into his locker, flushed the toilet and exited the men’s bathroom. From there I went down the hall to the coffee mess, poured Captain Mac a fresh cup of coffee and walked back to his office with his beverage.</p> <p>Once more I knocked on his door frame and announced, “Your coffee sir”. Captain Mac waved me into his office without looking up from his desk. “Sorry that it took so long, Petty Officer Smith had just finished running vinegar through the coffee maker to clean it out. The coffee has a little wang to it”. I said, placing his coffee back on his desk. “Thanks,” Captain Mack murmured as I walked out.</p>	8928
<p>Please break it down for us, Barney style.</p> <p>I love you, you love me, we’re a happy familee,</p> <p>With a great big hug and a kiss from me to you,</p> <p>Won’t you say you love me too.</p> <p>Sorry but that’s a Barney breakdown for ya</p>	10564

TABLE 4

Sexually Intimate Posts that Discuss Penises and Penis Size

Quote from post	Post ID #
<p>The story.. When John got assigned to his barracks he walked in and met his roommate Dan. Dan had come from the showers and had those little towels around his waist that the air force gives you. John said he could see the man's tip protruding from the bottom of the towel. My uncle being a very unfiltered guy was in just amazement and straight up asked "is that your cock!?" Dan said it was and all he could say was "Jesus Christ! How big is that thing?" Dan quietly said "around 10-11inches.." My uncle was obviously intrigued so he asked him a bunch of question and assumed he got laid all the time. Dan totally changed his perception. He said he couldn't keep partners because he was too big. He always felt like a side show because girls would want to see it but would never have sex with him so he got laid the least of all of his friends. My uncle is very outspoken so he makes a great wing man so he felt his mission was to get Dan laid and he concurred that anytime he got Dan a date the girl wouldn't sleep with him.</p> <p>Now on to a funny event. John and Dan and other friends were playing basketball at the gym on base and they were getting smoked by a all black squad from a different set of barracks. When John and his team were walking off the court one of the three other guys made the comment "get off the court little dick white boys!" John pipes up and said "yea you beat us but there is no little dicks here so shut your mouth". The other team broke out in laughter and said it again. John in fashion said "you wanna bet?" The other team said they would gladly do so. So John's team pooled together about 100 bucks and bet the other guys that they couldn't produce a dick bigger than theirs. They accepted. (thinking back on this it all sounds extremely gay but this is how it was told.) So the other team had a Major named Grimes who pulled his shorts down and produced a very respectable 8-9 inch flaccid cock. Dan then steps up and looks down on the majors dick and said flatly "you call that a dick?" then pulls his shorts down to expose his trouser snake and everyone went quiet. Then after about 5 seconds Grimes said "you ain't right man" and everyone busted out laughing. John said even though the guy couldn't get a win any weekend he got a win that day.</p>	616
<p>Back then, a Navy berthing was one of the most homophobic/homoerotic place on earth. Bunch of guys walking around naked saying, "don't look at my dick"</p>	657
<p>First Sergeant: Sloppy. I get it. This shit is hilarious, **BUT IF I GET ANOTHER CALL FROM SUPER FOB CSM, I'm now going to use your dick to FUCK START HIS FACE!**</p>	2251
<p>Lets all be honest here, it doesn't matter whose dick was used, nothing was going to fuck-start Hawks head into doing anything that wasn't more mayhem.</p>	2324
<p>Sending you a dick Pic now</p>	6685

TABLE 5

Sexually Intimate Posts that Discuss Queerness and Homophobia

Quote from post	Post ID #
thinking back on this it all sounds extremely gay The military is the gayest bunch of straight men you'll ever meet.	641
It's only gay if balls are touching.	645
Had a young former marine say "It's only gay if you make it gay."	647
Only gay if you push back	649
Aye, but did ya's ever play Gay Chicken?	685
In the late 1980's early 1990's when I was in the Coast Guard there were witch-hunts for actually gay or suspended gay service members.	7707
Because, I guess, TEH GAY is a little like monkeypox only with evil superpowers of penetrating solid-ass objects like vulcanized rubber suits, and can get transmitted by touch from a rescue diver to the poor, innocent, virginal, pure-as-the-driven-snow commercial mariners when they rescue them, and we can't have that?	7711
Its a soft porn movie for women and gay/bi men. The fact that so many of us completely missed that is testament to it being a *good* soft porn movie.	10036
Back atchya, and to your lady too. I was raised that men didn't say "love" to each other except in church. So that craven insecurity was supposed to make you more "manly," right? I have news. It doesn't. Love you too, man - y'know in the manly way that isn't that *other* way that we're *never* going to talk about, *ever*. Now I'm laughing at myself. Such a *big* boy...	6700

TABLE 6

Sexually Intimate Posts that Discuss Gay Sex

Quote from post	Post ID #
Well you'll be happy to know that I didn't have sex with any of the guys in my platoon!	63
Yeah, that E5 would have been at least field graded even if he admitted it. You cannot fuck your subordinates in full view and get away with it. From my hazy memory, he would have had to agree to a Field Grade Art. 15 as that is the only way they could take his rank short of a courts martial and he maybe thought he could beat the rap?	136
But that's what good battle buddies are for [in reference to sex]	809
Friends are friends, pals are pas, but buddies sleep together.	813
<p>This story happens when “don't ask, don't tell” was still a thing. Generally, at this point, nobody really cared if Marines were gay or not. Nobody really questioned anything and just kind of kept on with their lives, as long as nothing embarrassed the company or battalion. This story involves two drill instructors who were suspected of being gay, not that it actually matters, and what transpired on a bed. You hear a story starting off like that and you automatically think that somebody gets caught in some weird sexual position where they're hanging from some sex swing upside down and all the blood has rushed in the head. Or at least that's what I think of immediately. No I'm not kink shaming here. [...]</p> <p>As the initial story went for this, the two were sitting on a mattress together. One was showing the other how to break down a pistol, clean it, and then put it back together. Sometime during this event they ended up lying down together. Now I don't know about you but I don't understand why you need to lie down to service a weapon. But hey maybe it's something I wasn't taught and I've been doing it wrong all these years. Somehow during all of this they forgot that there was actually one round still in the chamber. “Accidentally” the trigger was pulled and the bullet entered one Marine's left ass cheek, bounced around a little bit, and managed to find its way straight out of his.... yeah. Oh his beanstalk would never be the same after this.</p>	7441

TABLE 7

Sexually Intimate Posts that Discuss Masturbation

Quote from post	Post ID #
<p>Think about how you feel right now, and then go masturbate to completion. Once you've climaxed, reconsider that big decision. Do you still feel the same way about it? Masturbation releases a huge rush of hormones. Guys often joke about "Post nut clarity."</p>	794
<p>That's roughly a third of living humans who have just never gotten to know their own sexuality. No wonder we've got so many hang ups around sex, a third of us aren't even comfortable enough with it to engage in a solo mission!</p> <p>Feel like I'm channeling my old psych of sex professor here, he spent an entire 3 hour lecture once basically just telling us all "fucking masturbate, damn you, you'll be physically, emotionally, and mentally healthier!"</p>	741
<p>Any 'buddy' who gives someone a secondhand fleshlight is in fact a Blue Falcon, because that's pretty much second only to giving someone a giftwrapped hand grenade *sans* retaining pin!</p>	2821
<p>No bunk room off the Company Commander's office, but he did have a private head which I was responsible for cleaning, so after a week or so, he told me I could use it, since I was cleaning it.</p> <p>It was good for some private 'me time.'</p>	1376